

SUBJECT: Revised Consumer Advisory on Methylmercury in Fish

TO: Regional Directors
Special Nutrition Programs
All Regions

We recognize that regions recently received information on the subject matter from the Child Nutrition Division. However, this memorandum is directed to the commodity programs. On March 19, 2004, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) announced their joint consumer advisory on methylmercury in fish and shellfish for women who may become pregnant, pregnant women, nursing mothers, and young children. This unifies advice from both FDA and EPA and supersedes FDA's and EPA's 2001 advisories. The Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) relies on the recommendations of FDA in matters pertaining to the safety of commercially available food offered through our commodity food programs.

Recommendations of the Advisory

The purpose of the revised FDA/EPA advisory is to inform women and the parents of young children on how to get the positive health benefits from eating fish and shellfish, while minimizing their mercury exposure. The advisory is significant because it is the first time FDA and EPA have combined their advice into a single uniform advisory. Previously FDA issued an advisory on the consumption of commercially caught fish, while EPA issued advice on recreationally caught fish. FDA and EPA revised their existing advisories as a result of recommendations FDA received from its Foods Advisory Committee.

The revised advisory contains three recommendations for women who might become pregnant, women who are pregnant, nursing mothers, and young children:

1. Do not eat shark, swordfish, king mackerel, or tilefish because they contain high levels of mercury.
2. Eat up to 12 ounces (2 average meals) a week of a variety of fish and shellfish that are lower in mercury.
 - Five of the most commonly eaten fish that are low in mercury are shrimp, canned light tuna, salmon, pollock, and catfish.
 - Another commonly eaten fish, albacore ("white") tuna, has more mercury than canned light tuna. So, when choosing your two meals of fish and shellfish, you may eat up to six ounces (one average meal) of albacore tuna per week.

3. Check local advisories about the safety of fish caught by family and friends in your local lakes, rivers, and coastal areas. If no advisories exist, eat up to six ounces (one average meal) per week of fish you catch from local waters, but don't consume any other fish during that week.

Follow these same recommendations when feeding fish and shellfish to your young child, but serve smaller portions.

Commodity Tuna

The specifications for the canned tuna utilized in the commodity food programs specify "light" tuna. USDA does not purchase white, albacore tuna for the commodity programs.

Quantities of Tuna Provided in USDA Commodity Programs

The quantity of tuna that USDA makes available through its commodity assistance programs varies by program. Participants in all food programs should be informed about the recommendations in the FDA/EPA advisory and the amount of fish that can safely be consumed by women who may become pregnant, pregnant women, nursing mothers and young children. Please note that the advisory does counsel that the more expensive albacore tuna (also called white tuna) contains higher levels of mercury than canned light tuna, and recommends that consumption be limited to six ounces of albacore tuna per week. Participants should continue to be advised that fish and seafood, including canned tuna, can be an important part of a healthy and balanced diet. They are good sources of high quality protein and other essential nutrients.

- **Schools and Institutions**

USDA does not control the quantity of tuna served in these programs. Menu planners should be advised not to include tuna meals in excess of 12 ounces of tuna per person, per week for women who may become pregnant, pregnant women, nursing mothers and young children.

- **Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP)**

Participants in the CSFP program can obtain a maximum of 24 ounces of tuna per month which is within the FDA/EPA recommended limit of 12 ounces per week for women who may become pregnant, pregnant women, nursing mothers and young children.

- **Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR)**

Participants in the FDPIR program could potentially receive 72 ounces of tuna per month if they elected to receive tuna as their only selection from the Meat, Poultry, Fish, Dry Beans, and Eggs and Nuts group. This amount exceeds the FDA/EPA recommendation of 12 ounces per week for women who may become pregnant, pregnant women, nursing mothers and young children. Participants in the FDPIR program should select a variety of offerings from the Meat, Poultry, Fish, Dry Beans, Eggs and Nuts group so they do not exceed the recommended amount of tuna.

- **The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP)**

USDA does not control the quantity of tuna provided to participants in TEFAP. State agencies that establish distribution rates should be advised not to exceed 12 ounces of tuna per person, per week in order to ensure compliance with guidelines for tuna to women who may become pregnant, pregnant women, nursing mothers and to caretakers of young children.

FNS is developing a brochure outlining guidance for household program participants. This brochure will be available on the FDD website. Distribution sites should be encouraged to duplicate this information and make it available to individual program participants. Staff at distribution sites should counsel participants who select amounts of tuna in excess of the recommended amounts. We acknowledge that TEFAP service delivery infrastructure is not uniformly equipped to provide this type of information to every participating household, but every attempt should be made to provide the information to women who may become pregnant, pregnant women, nursing mothers and to caretakers of young children.

We are including links to the FDA/EPA advisory, which includes frequently asked questions; a press release announcing the advisory; and an FDA Backgrounder that provides information on its development. Please share this information with your State agencies. FDA and EPA plan to launch a comprehensive outreach and educational campaign to complement release of the advisory.

- (1) Press Release <http://www.fda.gov/bbs/topics/news/2004/NEW01038.html>
- (2) Advisory <http://www.cfsan.fda.gov/~dms/admeHg3.html>
- (3) Backgrounder
<http://www.fda.gov/oc/opacom/hottopics/mercury/backgrounder.html>

Cathie McCullough

Director

Food Distribution Division

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